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TAGS: [PINS](#) [PGOV](#) [EFIN](#) [BE](#) [AF](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: BELGIUM PRIME MINISTER DESCRIBES SHIFT ON PLANNED
AFGHANISTAN DEPLOYMENT

REF: BRUSSELS 3040

Classified By: A/DCM TERRI ROBL; REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Belgians may send additional air assets to Afghanistan, rather than ground troops, according to Prime Minister Verhofstadt. In a meeting with the Ambassador on September 11, Verhofstadt also said the Belgian contingent in Lebanon was working with a 1,000 person Chinese de-mining unit. Referring to politics, Verhofstadt was positive about his party's chances in the local elections set for October 8, and indicated he would call federal elections in late May or early June, thereby maximizing his ability to avoid lame duck status. As always, the upbeat, confident prime minister seems to thrive on challenges, in this case the three year freefall in the popularity of his governing coalition. Ambassador also mentioned that negotiators had initialed a new bilateral tax treaty, and suggested the Prime Minister might want to sign it with the Secretary of Treasury when it is ready. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Ambassador and DCM met with Belgian Prime Minister Verhofstadt on September 11. In addition to thanking the Prime Minister for participating in the Embassy's remembrance service earlier that day, the Ambassador used the occasion to discuss the future of Belgium's deployment in Afghanistan, other pol-mil issues, and the current political scene. Highlights of the discussion follow below.

Afghanistan -- Belgium to meet commitment, but rethinking how to do it

¶3. (C) In response to a question from the Ambassador, the Prime Minister said the Belgians would send additional forces to Afghanistan, but would not be able to send a 300-soldier ground unit as suggested earlier. The current idea was to offer either a squadron of F-16s (including associated ground support) totaling about 80 people, or to assign a land forces component to a joint Franco-Turkish company. The roughly 300 Belgian troops now at Kabul airport will remain in place. When the Prime Minister said he had not made up his mind which military units to send, the Ambassador proposed asking NATO what they preferred. The Prime Minister welcomed this and said he would use the information/justification in announcing the final decision at his "State of the Union" speech to Parliament in mid-October. The Ambassador agreed to push NATO to give a frank assessment of which type of Belgian contribution would be most useful. (Note: In discussing this subject, addresses should carefully protect the source, not least

because the final shape of the Belgian contribution is still under debate within a coalition that does not entirely support the idea in the first place. End note)

Lebanon

¶4. (C) The Ambassador also thanked the Prime Minister for Belgium's contribution to the revamped UNIFIL organization. Verhofstadt expressed appreciation, adding that the Belgian group would be working closely with a Chinese de-mining contingent of about 1,000 people. In the meantime, the Belgians have been in touch with the Israelis to obtain minefield maps. On a separate military topic, Verhofstadt indicated the Belgians would be returning an F-16 squadron to the Baltics. He gave no details about timing.

Politics -- Federal Elections in May/June, Bitter-sounding Squabbles Part of the Game

¶5. (SBU) With federal elections required before the end of June 2007, Verhofstadt said he was determined to have his cabinet continue for as long as possible. Accordingly, he expected to schedule the polls during either the last week of May or the start of June. By not holding the vote at an earlier date (as some in the opposition have suggested), Verhofstadt hopes to put off becoming a lame duck for the longest possible time.

¶6. (SBU) Verhofstadt professed little concern about increasingly bitter squabbling between the country's two

other leading politicians, Flemish Minister-President Leterme (Christian Democrat) and Walloon Minister-President Di Rupo (Socialist). Leterme's strident attacks on the Francophone community, and Di Rupo's equally spirited attacks on the Flemish were tactical, as the senior leaders of both the Flemish Christian Democrats and French Socialists wanted to burnish their image as defenders of their respective communities. The two will find a way to make deals about political matters when the time comes, according to Verhofstadt.

Extremists

¶7. (SBU) The Prime Minister also saw little reason for concern about the arrest on September 7 of seventeen suspected far-right extremists (reftel). Their organization was "bad but not big." The police had been tracking the group for two years and have thoroughly penetrated it with informers. Verhofstadt claimed they had ties to extremists in the U.S., and noted that the investigating magistrate had decided to roll up the outfit when it appeared there was an increased risk of weapons being used. Verhofstadt insisted that members were not presently in the military, but readily conceded some had been in the military. The weapons were commercially available rather than military issue. (Note: We are following up on the purported U.S. connection. The authorities formally charged twelve people on September 12 End note)

Double Txation Treaty

¶8. (U) The Prime Minister was very interested in the "initialing" of the Double Taxation Treaty which he raised when he met with the President last January. He said he would be interested in going to the U.S. to sign the treaty at the Treasury or having Secretary Paulsen coming to Belgium for a signing ceremony.

Swift

¶9. (C) The Ambassador raised the Swift issue. He Prime Minister was sanguine about it and said he had asked for an investigation to get it out of the political arena and out of the Belgian Parliament. (Further details septel).

Comment

¶10. (C) Verhofstadt's legendary confidence and energy were very much in evidence during the Ambassador's session with him. Without ever referring to his party's slide in the polls from first to fourth place since taking office in 2003, he noted simply that he faced a tough election, but expected to come out on top. In the meantime, he relished the challenge of managing Belgium's government.
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